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Turner Defends CIA Use of Correspondents Overseas

Associated Press

CIA Director Stansfield Turner yesterday defended the Carter administration's policy of allowing the spy agency to use American foreign correspondents.

Turner told the American Society of Newspaper Editors there have been three instances in which he approved use of American correspondents in CIA operations. In no case, however, did the plan materialize, and the journalists were not used, he said. Turner said no journalists are working now for the CIA.

Turner said he needs to be able to decide to use journalists "only in very exceptional situations. What if we have a terrorist situation and the only way in is through journalists? Those are the kinds of circumstances I mean."

Members of the ASNE strongly disagreed with Turner.

"Do you think it's worthwhile . . . to cast into doubt the ethical and professional position of every foreign correspondent?" asked A.N. Rosenthal, executive editor of The New York Times.

Turner said he changed CIA policy in 1977 to allow use of journalists, shortly after the Carter administration took office. In 1974, then-CIA Director George Bush, in the midst of a public outcry, banned the use of American journalists.

Turner said it would be "naïve" to think that a foreign government would assume that journalists of any nationality are free of association with intelligence agencies. He said he would be ashamed if he needed a law to protect his ethical reputation.

Rosenthal and editor Eugene Patterson of the St. Petersburg, Fla., Times discussed the point.

Rosenthal said that when past CIA ties with journalists were disclosed "there was an understandable uproar. Journalists throughout the country felt this endangered not only the ethics of our work but the physical existence of our foreign correspondents. Certainly, as an editor of a paper with a large network of foreign correspondents and as a former foreign correspondent, I felt that was the case," he said.

Patterson agreed that the CIA's policy jeopardized American correspondents abroad and said he would take the matter up again in the editorial pages of his newspaper.